

## THE *CANTIGAS DE SANTA MARIA*, NEW CHARACTERS FOR A NEW LITERATURE

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During the Late Middle Ages western culture flourished not only in the realm of politics, but also in esthetics. With the reorganization of both the political space and the political rules, the different arts began to incorporate those changes as their themes. Among many important events, political power was transferred from the feudal lords to the king, the urban centers grew as people moved to the cities from rural settlements, and the Christian religion confirmed its importance in daily life by and large replacing the pagan practices.

Artists developed their own characteristic style to express these vast social changes. Gothic style appeared in Paris, reflecting the power of King Louis XI's rule, and soon spread all over the continent. From the huge, new cathedrals to markets and houses, architecture was the most important expression of this "art of the northern men." Religion, business, domestic life, everything in the main important cities was pervaded by this new artistic style.

And this new art, for the first time, represented the author as well as the common people. Until the Romanic period, the author was not part of the work and one rarely finds an author who signs his work. Even the characters were not realistic. In epic poems or in the *cantigas de amigo* and in the *cantigas de amor*, the characters are archetypal or generic; they are very far from well-defined persons with individualized feelings and expectations.

In epic poems, heroes always are gifted with rare skills and accomplish astonishing missions. The *amigas* were anonymous maidens who suffered indescribable loneliness due to the absence of their beloved partners. None of them have names, geographic origin

nor social functions. In the courtly environment, as well, no one has a name, the background is always the same, and there are no solutions presented for that "endemic" loneliness.

Romanic literature is a border literature. According to the geography of these poems, the *cantigas de amigo* have the court as their settings; the *cantigas de amor* happen in wild natural settings; and the epic poems are located in lands to be conquered. Everything may be considered a limit: there is a limit between the natural and the cultural; the passionate maiden doesn't have a man; ordinary people don't reach the nobles and the troubadour doesn't have his *señor*; and there is a limit separating the hero and the human. Although the hero can overcome geographic boundaries, he represents human limits and impossible boundaries. Heroes are the limits between the soldiers and the king, or between mankind and God.

All Romanic characters are stereotypes, as are Romanic pictorial representations. Bodies lack proportion, landscapes lack perspective, and the size of people is determined by their importance. There are always stereotypes representing the boundaries between people and characters.

However, in Gothic art, the literal aspect is revealed. In each form, in each immediate element the author perceives the object and represents it, mainly when it relates to a person, as Hauser points out:

In a clearer and more consistent way [...] Gothic naturalism manifests itself in the representation of the human form. In this field, everywhere we come across an entirely new conception of art, a conception that radically opposes itself to the Romanic stereotyped abstraction. Now, the interest is completely centered on the individual and on the characteristic. (Hauser 238)

Even the goddess was a stereotype. Romanesque virgins were always depicted according to the majesty pattern: sitting on a throne, the child on the lap, no expressions on the face. The worshiper is supposed to face this hieratic image and have his/her mind transported into a mystical stage where there is no self-awareness.

In any one of these cases one can observe a dialectical interaction between an ordinary person and the characters. First, because there is no human level to set the characters; second, because among the characters there are no ordinary people at all.

Yet, in the *Cantigas de Santa Maria* (CSM), we can find new characters in relating to both space and psychological conflicts. Well-defined cities are cited as reliable places. Either due to the religious context or to fame, different cities and countries are the settings for specific people, such as pilgrims in Rocamadour and in Santiago de Compostela, Muslims from southern Spain, an empress from Rome, a patriarch from the Middle East.

If we think about stereotypes, there are typical ermites, but they have dialectic interactions with the characters that are supposed to be saved (CSM 115 and 65). The Jews, the Muslims and the gamblers also were somehow stereotyped, but they either convert or quit their vice. The mothers are very different too. There is one who kills her son (CSM 17), there is a nun who abandons her son, but Mary takes care of him (CSM 65), and there is another mother who argues with Mary because her son dies (CSM 76).

Breaking a long-standing stereotype, the CSM presents a different kind of child. As the Gothic Mother Mary is no longer a hieratic goddess, also the baby she carries has a new image: for the first time this child really looks like a child. Ariès observes that since ancient times, until the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, children are not represented with particular expressions nor specific proportions, they are small-sized adults (51). However, the Alfonsine work is breakthrough literature and describes real children, as Kulp-Hill points out:

Children in the *Cantigas* are realistically and sensitively portrayed. They are lively and romp and play like children of any time or place, and are a source of pleasure to their parents, who go to great lengths to have them and keep them, and grieve profoundly when they die. The miniatures depict tender scenes of parent and child, adding eloquent visual touches: a father reaches to take an eager toddler

from his mother's-arms (139), a young child lolls on his mother lap in a cozy domestic setting (46), frivolous Musa dances in her garden under the admiring gaze of her parents (79). Holy Mary is a fond mother who plays with her beautiful child. (50-51)

Maybe the best cantiga to illustrate this idea is cantiga 139, where a child asks The Infant Jesus if he wants “*papar*” (line 38). “*Papar*” is a typical childish expression meaning “to eat”, and this word shows how keen the author was about childhood and its context. Children are not little adults any more, since the CSM.

In general, all the characters break impersonal stereotypes. Priests, for instance, can be good or bad persons. One, in cantiga 75, worries very much about money, another so lecherous that he crosses the river to look for prostitutes (CSM 11), and there is also a pope who is so devoted that he cuts off his own hand so as not to fall into temptation (CSM 206). Concerning men and women, cantiga 115 presents a man who can not control his sexual desire, and cantiga 132 shows a woman who wanted “*seu dereyto aver*” —to have her right— (lines 138-9). Curiously the man is weak and the woman is correct, and thus it presents also a different point of view regarding gender stereotypes.

A male sinner is the main character in cantiga 152, and the author is deep enough to describe the sinner's existential conflict:

E un dia, u estava cuidando en ssa fazenda  
 com' emendass' en sa vida, e avia gran contenda,  
 ca a alma consellava que fizesse dest' emenda,  
 mas a carne non queria que leixasse seus sabores; (152,  
 16-19)

It is interesting to observe the disagreement between the critical mind and the pernicious flesh, reflecting the psychological struggle between the pleasure principle and the reality principle.

Human characteristics are so important in the cantigas that even Mary exhibits human weaknesses. She looks for revenge, as in cantiga 19 (“*Santa Maria fillou vingança dos tres cavaleiros que mataron seu*

comigo ant' o seu altar.”); she is conceited when, in cantiga 18, she rejoices with a silk hood; and she is jealous in cantiga 274 as she brings to her church a votive calf that was not delivered. Worshipers find in the Virgin a completely different personality than that present in the biblical Mary or in the Romanic goddess. As Clarke notes,

Alfonso [...] chose not the distant queen serenely reigning over the angels in heaven, but the more entertaining and still human Mary, a compassionate, ceaselessly busy working woman ready for all emergencies and ever on call, a here-and-now heroine wielding her power, righting wrongs, helping those who beseech her, even resorting to trickery to save the soul of “un gentil que adorava os ydolos” (335), and human enough to take vengeance (316, 317, 318), thus playing a multiple role—from that of devil defier to that of provider of a needed rhyme-word for a cleric’s prosa in her honor. (47, 202) (12)

The last new type of character we will examine in this work is the author. Although Dante is acclaimed in his *Divine Comedy* for inserting himself in the text, Alfonso did it before, and he became part of some cantigas in different contexts.

The Wise King exposes himself as a man who has committed many errors and sins. There are sincere verses that, if not talking about regrets, manifest the anxiety of a man who analyzes himself and concludes that he is insufficient and more limited than his life requires. Therefore, in the *Petiçon* (CSM 401) Alfonso begs for Mary’s help in order to go to paradise after this life.

It is impressive how the king expresses his emotions, his fears, his hopes, and his anxiety. Regarding cantiga 209, Keller & Kinkade observe that “Nowhere have we encountered a similar account of a king’s description of how he felt in the midst of the misery of an illness or how he prayed in the depths of his despair” (350). These authors believe that “At least five other authors of note in Medieval Spanish letters are remarkable for the revelation of their personal feelings

and opinion. [...] But no author equaled the very precise, emotional, and intimately personal disclosures found in those *Cantigas de Santa Maria*..." (351)

And the Monarch's private self is disclosed in cantiga 401, where one learns about his fear of the devil (verse 23) and of people who may be false or traitors (verse 49), or a bad counselor (verse 50), and his fear of the deadly sins (verse 74) and of the infernal fire (verse 75).

Alfonso is also aware of his power and value, as when he quotes himself as the person who heard a miracle: "com' oy". He knows his testimony is a trustful document. The author presents his self-awareness, in the 400 cantigas his expressions are not a limited troubadours' voice only, they are the words of a poet who talks about both himself and his work. As Snow points out,

[...] mucho más que la narrativa "literaria" de un trovador (divinización del provençal) que maneja Alfonso como inspirado innovador en el campo del marial medieval y que, según todos vemos lúcidamente, representa también al Alfonso-poeta-creador. Donde nos quedan más cosas por minar es en las venas personales que particularizan el trovador que se autodramatiza: en sus comentarios sobre el dilema artístico que tan ágilmente incorpora a las poesías cuya composición inspiraba dicho dilema; en sus autopresentaciones como trovador y rey, en particular como rey de España, hijo de Fernando, enemigo de moros, cantor de Maria; y en sus autoproyecciones como pecador, al igual que todos los hombres ante el poder del Cielo. (88)

Alfonso is not a mere troubadour influenced by Provençal poetry, he moves toward a new, daring literature representing himself, talking about himself, his intimate feelings, his sources for miracles, and his creative process.

This king was not only aware of himself, but he was also aware of the public who would read or listen to his work. In this case another

fresh innovation transforms the public into characters. When he enters into dialogues with the receivers using, in a vernacular idiom, expressions that suggest a higher level of attention, he makes the person who is reading or listening to become a part of the story.

To conclude, it is interesting to highlight that the new characters found in the CSM give dynamic performances in different geographic places, even the place of a reader or listener creates a new character. They are not parts of the scenery: rather, they are interactive personalities in specific environments.

In Gothic art, each form manifests a particular detail that belongs to the represented object. In the CSM, the miracles related, the characters described and the events narrated, everything has a reliability according to the context to which each belongs, as well as suggesting an objective and external reality both regarding the artist and the receiver. Gothic man is a searcher; even if he still sees himself as the center of the universe, "at least he is not as the Romanic man, crushed by the universe. Not even passive." (Duby 152) He is much more than this, for he is approaching the uses of reason and individuality.

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